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Trying to Plug a U.S. 'Radar Hole'

The Carter administration's recent decision to dispatch four of the Air Force's Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes to Saudi Arabia might lead the average citizen to believe there are plenty of the high-technology aircraft to go around.

But the painful fact is that the United States needs every AWACS plane it has—and more—to protect the continental United States from a sneak attack.

A top-secret Pentagon assessment of our interlocking early warning systems has turned up a frightening flaw: a "radar hole" big enough for the Soviets to drive an armada of low-flying nuclear bombers through.

The report puts the message in one succinct, hair-raising paragraph: "Present U.S. surveillance systems can provide warning of aircraft attacking at high or medium altitudes through the polar region, but they have virtually no capability to provide warning or attack characterization from any other threat axis."

In other words, if the Russians—or the Chinese, for that matter—don't oblige us by sending their bombers in from just the right direction and at just the right altitude, the United States might not know they were coming until the bombs started falling.

Present U.S. early warning systems are aimed primarily at incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles, which undoubtedly would approach form the north. Satellites and tracking stations provide good coverage.

But for early warning on aircraft, Pentagon sources told my associate Dale Van Atta, the United States depends on the outdated Semi-Automatic Ground Environment System and its intended replacement, the Joint Surveillance System, which say is not much better.

"Both of these systems are range-limited, both leave significant gaps in low-altitude radar coverage," the secret report warns. In addition, even the Joint Surveillance System lacks what the Pentagon calls "counter-countermeasures capability"—meaning electronic equipment that could overcome jamming and other enemy techniques that can neutralize our radar defenses.

This is where the AWACS planes come in—or could, if we had enough of them. AWACS aircraft, the report notes, "can provide low-altitude coverage, but they are too few in numbers and . . . would be prohibitively expensive to maintain as a strategic warning fence while remaining available for other assigned missions."

The United States has exactly 20 of these $100 million-per-copy super-sophisticated surveillance planes. Two more have been funded for each of the next three fiscal years, with an eventual goal of 34 AWACS aircraft. Even that would be inadequate for proper protection of the continental United States, particularly when, as now, up to 20 percent of the AWACS force is deployed on "other assigned missions" elsewhere in the world.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is trying to plug the radar hole without having to depend solely on AWACS planes, which it would prefer to keep for their designed role in offensive operations rather than as a defensive stopgap.

"An Enhanced Distant Early Warning line of minimally attended radars could improve coverage in the northern approaches to North America and significantly reduce operating costs," the secret report states. "Over-the-Horizon Backscatter radars will provide long-range surveillance of the coastal approaches."

The Pentagon also wants a modernized interceptor aircraft force—as well as more AWACS aircraft.

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